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FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

0

Albania

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OVERVIEW:

A coalition led by the opposition Socialist Party (PS) won a decisive victory in June 2013 parliamentary elections, ousting a bloc headed by two-term prime minister Sali Berisha and his Democratic Party (PD). The PS-led coalition was bolstered by the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), which had withdrawn from the government in April. Berisha conceded defeat after the vote and resigned as party chairman. PS chairman Edi Rama took office as prime minister, pledging to tackle persistent corruption and other obstacles to European Union (EU) membership, and his cabinet was approved by the parliament in September.

The Central Election Commission (CEC) was crippled by partisan infighting, and a range of electoral irregularities were reported, but international monitors praised the competitive and relatively peaceful campaign as well as the voting and counting processes on and after election day. The fairly positive assessment and the smooth transfer of power played a role in the European Commission's October recommendation that Albania be granted EU candidate status, four years after the country first applied. However, the European Council decided against the move in December, putting it off for another year.

2014 SCORES

STATUS

Partly Free

FREEDOM RATING
(1 = BEST, 7 = WORST)

3.0

CIVIL LIBERTIES
(1 = BEST, 7 = WORST)

3

POLITICAL RIGHTS
(1 = BEST, 7 = WORST)

3

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Political Rights: 27 / 40 (+3) [Key]**A. Electoral Process:** 8 / 12

The unicameral, 140-member Kuvendi (Assembly) is elected through proportional representation in 12 regional districts of varying size. All members serve four-year terms. The prime minister is designated by the majority party or coalition, and the president—who does not hold executive powers but heads the military and plays an important role in selecting senior judges—is chosen by the parliament for a maximum of two five-year terms.

Preparations for the June 2013 parliamentary elections

were seriously disrupted by political deadlock in the CEC. After the LSI left the PD-led government in April, the parliamentary majority dismissed the CEC member nominated by the LSI and appointed a replacement nominated by the Republican Party, a member of the governing coalition. The three remaining opposition-backed members of the seven-seat commission resigned in protest, and the opposition refused to name replacements. As a result, the CEC operated with just four members throughout the election period, preventing it from making crucial decisions that require a five-vote majority. Earlier, the CEC failed to decide on seat distribution for the country's electoral districts, leading the parliamentary majority to intervene and set the allotments using outdated 2009 population figures.

Other problems reported by monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) included the partisan use of administrative resources, pressure on public employees and students to attend campaign events, alleged vote buying, some cases of family or proxy voting, and various missed deadlines. However, the observer mission found that the overall campaign was vibrant, competitive, and largely peaceful, despite an election-day shooting incident in which an LSI supporter was killed and two other people, including a PD candidate, were injured.

According to the final results, the PS captured 65 seats, the LSI took 16, and two smaller PS-allied parties—the Human Rights and Unity Party (PBDNJ), which represents ethnic Greeks, and the Christian Democratic Party—each garnered 1 seat. Meanwhile, the PD won 50 seats and its junior partners—the nationalist Justice, Integration, and Unity Party and the Republican Party—took 4 and 3 seats, respectively. Voter turnout was reported at 53.5 percent.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 13 / 16 (+3)

The two main political parties, the PD and the PS, are sharply polarized and given to personality-driven rivalry, though in 2012 they cooperated on electoral reforms in a process that was criticized by smaller parties. Berisha and the PD had worked to consolidate partisan control over state institutions, particularly after violent antigovernment protests in early 2011, and the PS lost the crucial Tirana mayoralty in flawed 2012 municipal voting. However, the Socialists' clear victory in 2013 restored confidence in the ability of opposition forces to secure a rotation of power through elections.

Ethnic minorities were able to campaign freely in their own languages in 2013, and voters had access to ballot materials in minority languages. The PBDNJ represents ethnic Greek interests in politics and government. The Romany minority and other marginalized groups are reportedly vulnerable to political exploitation and vote-buying schemes.

C. Functioning of Government: 6 / 12

Corruption is pervasive, and the EU has repeatedly called for rigorous implementation of antigraft measures. The electoral framework lacks robust transparency provisions on campaign financing, requiring no disclosures before

election day. Convictions of high-ranking officials and judges for corruption and abuse of power remain rare. In July 2013, the Supreme Court declined to review a February appellate ruling that sharply reduced the prison sentences of businessmen and former defense officials who had been convicted in connection with a 2008 arms depot explosion that killed 26 people. Fatmir Mediu, the defense minister at the time, had escaped punishment through parliamentary immunity and a general amnesty at the end of 2012. A number of other senior officials, including new parliament speaker Ilir Meta and new PD leader Lulzim Basha, have been cleared of corruption charges in controversial court rulings in recent years.

In December, several court officials were arrested after video recordings published in the media allegedly showed them collecting bribes on behalf of judges. Also that month, former defense minister Arben Imami was charged with corruption regarding tenders for Defense Ministry television advertisements. Albania was ranked 116 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 40 / 60 (+1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 13 / 16

While the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, the intermingling of powerful business, political, and media interests inhibits the development of independent news outlets; most are seen as biased toward either the PS or the PD. Reporters have little job security and remain subject to lawsuits, intimidation, and in some cases physical attacks by those facing media scrutiny. Berisha's government sometimes placed financial pressure on critical outlets, and government-friendly media have reportedly been favored in state advertising purchases. Most election-related media regulations were weakly enforced in 2013. A June CEC ruling required broadcasters to air recordings prepared by political parties during their newscasts, raising concerns about editorial independence. The government does not limit internet access.

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and it is generally upheld in practice. The government typically does not limit academic freedom, though students and teachers have faced political pressure ahead of elections.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 9 / 12 (+1)

Freedoms of association and assembly are generally respected. In September 2013, an appeals court convicted two Republican Guard commanders of manslaughter for the shooting deaths of three antigovernment protesters in January 2011, rejecting the murder convictions and stiff sentences sought by prosecutors. The ruling meant that the men would serve no further prison time, as their pretrial detention exceeded the sentences handed down to them. Demonstrations since 2011 have been relatively peaceful.

Nongovernmental organizations function without restrictions but have limited funding and policy influence. In what was hailed as a major victory for civil society,

nationwide protests led by students and environmental activists prompted Prime Minister Rama to announce in November 2013 that Albania would reject a U.S. request to host the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons.

The constitution guarantees workers the rights to organize and bargain collectively, and most have the right to strike. However, effective collective bargaining remains limited, and union members have little protection against discrimination by employers. Child labor is a problem, and informal child workers sometimes face hazardous conditions.

F. Rule of Law: 9 / 16

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but the underfunded courts are subject to political influence. In July 2013, the High Council of Justice, which is led by President Bujar Nishani, appointed seven candidates seen as PD allies to the powerful Tirana appeals court. Meanwhile, Nishani blocked former prosecutor general Ina Rama's request to be reinstated as an appeals court judge, which is her right under the law, and the Tirana appeals court reopened a closed abuse-of-power investigation into Rama related to a prosecutor's 2009 firing. Rama had finished her tenure as prosecutor general in late 2012, having clashed repeatedly with the PD government. She had also complained that court officials effectively protected one another when accused of wrongdoing. In September 2013, a former judge in Durres was acquitted of criminal charges related to his deliberate stalling of an appeal in a murder case, which had allowed the release of an organized crime figure who was then arrested for a new murder. The justice minister retains the power to open or close judicial disciplinary procedures. Judges sometimes face threats and physical violence. In January, a judge in Vlora was injured when an unidentified attacker threw acid at her face.

Police reportedly engage in abuse of suspects during arrest and interrogation. Prison inmates suffer from poor living conditions and lack of adequate medical treatment, often relying on family to provide food and other supplies. A November 2013 jailbreak raised concerns about corruption in the prison system and led to a series of firings and arrests of prison officials.

In an effort to combat rising crime rates, the new government in October 2013 restructured the police force, replacing commanders and disbanding several units, including the traffic police. Two high-ranking officers were murdered in separate incidents during the year. Albania is known as a transshipment point for heroin smugglers and a key site for cannabis production. Traditional tribal law and revenge killings remain a problem in parts of the north.

Roma face significant discrimination in education, health care, employment, and housing. A 2010 law bars discrimination based on race and several other categories, including sexual orientation and gender identity, and a May 2013 reform of the criminal code introduced protections against hate crimes and hate speech based on sexual orientation and gender identity. However, bias against gay and transgender people remains strong in practice.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 9 / 16

A raft of property-restitution cases related to confiscations during the communist era remains unresolved, and illegal construction is a major problem. The World Bank's 2014 Doing Business rankings listed Albania as one of the world's four worst countries for obtaining construction permits.

Women are underrepresented in politics and business, and the three largest political parties were fined in September 2013 for the failure of their candidate lists to meet a 30 percent quota for women. Just 25 of the 140 members elected to parliament in June 2013 were women. However, the new cabinet included a record six women, including the first female defense minister. Domestic violence is believed to be widespread, though the parliament has adopted some measures to combat the problem in recent years. A criminal code amendment passed in May 2013 made sexual violence within marriage a specific offense. Albania is a source country for trafficking in women and children.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**X = Score Received****Y = Best Possible Score****Z = Change from Previous Year**[Full Methodology](#)[About us](#)[Careers](#)[Contact Us](#)[Privacy Policy](#)[Credits](#)[Sitio de Freedom House México en español](#)[Freedom House Mexico Website \(in Spanish\)](#)[Subscribe](#)